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FRANKLIN PARK

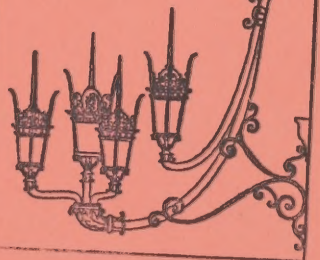
a chapter from

Boston Parks Guide

by Sylvester Baxter

1896

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INTRODUCTION

The September Bulletin reprints the chapter on Franklin Park from an early and important description of the Olmsted Park System: BOSTON PARK GUIDE.

The author, Sylvester Baxter, was a progressive journalist, influenced in the formation of the Metropolitan District Commission park system in and around Boston, and a friend of the Olmsteads.

Baxter was born in West Yarmouth, Mass. on February 6, 1850 to an old Massachusetts family. He was educated both at home and in Germany.

His professional life was as a journalist, beginning with the Boston Advertiser in 1871, and writer. He was a correspondent from Europe for several years and from Mexico, where he covered events for the Boston Herald and New York Sun.

A Baxter bibliography contains translations of German and Spanish books, magazine sketches of travel and book reviews and such diverse books as Berlin: A Study in Municipal Government, The Ring and the Tree and Other Poems and Spanish Colonial Architecture, among others.

Baxter is of interest to us because of his deep interest in urban parks. In the late 1880's and early 1890's, he wrote frequently and earnestly for a metropolitan park system around Boston. In 1891, he published Greater Boston, perhaps the earliest proposal for a metropolitan municipal system which included an interlocking system of parks from many communities around Boston.

Baxter's access to several influential newspapers either as an editorial writer or correspondent allowed him to publicize the ideas of Charles Eliot, landscape architect and F. L. Olmsted's first apprentice. Eliot devised the plan whereby the state would accumulate and preserve parcels of prime scenery "much the same way a museum collects pictures." The Trustees of Reservations was formed in 1891. This was the father of the Metropolitan Park System, which Eliot--with Baxter's valuable assistance--was able to work through the state legislature in 1893. Baxter assisted Eliot in selecting the sites to be included in the Park System. Within four years, 10,000 acres of woodland, fields, riverfront and sea-shore would be preserved. Baxter was the first secretary of the Metropolitan Park Commission (changed in 1919 to the present-day Metropolitan District Commission).

He was interested not only in preservation but also in the political and administrative aspects of open space.

Boston Park Guide was first published in 1896 and included the metropolitan parks and Boston playgrounds as well as the Olmstead Park System. A revised edition was printed in 1898.

There is, in the library of the Harvard Graduate School of Design, a letter from John C. Olmsted to Baxter. Evidently, Baxter requested more information on park architecture for the revised Guide. Dated January 17, 1898, the letter reads in part:

"My dear Baxter:

I have received your letter of the 12th instant. . . . The Playstead Overlook shelter in Franklin Park was very completely designed . . . in this office, and is the one building on the whole park system to which my father gave so much thought that the design may fairly be called his. . . . Another building which my father studied out with great particularity and for which he is more responsible than I am is the shelter on Schoolmaster Hill and the arbors connected with it. . . . If I can help you in any way . . . I hope that you will not hesitate to consult with me. . . . The success of our profession will inevitably depend on the education of public opinion and we look to you to help the community . . . in this respect."

(I am indebted to Ms. Cynthia Zaitzevsky for locating and first publishing this letter in 1973.)

In the Boston Evening Transcript of Sept. 29, 1923, Baxter wrote a review of the first 30 years of the Metropolitan Park System. What he had to say then is very appropriate today; it could've been written for the Franklin Park Coalition:

"The Parkways and boulevards were intended to be strictly subordinate to the reservations (and) woodland. . . . They were to make the reservations pleasantly and easily accessible. This they are doing. . . . They are serving it so well as to have become the primary factory in the scheme of the park system. The service of motor traffic, recreational only in a minor degree, has become the main consideration. . . . Policing is (now) of vast importance. Yet policing (should be) subordinate to an intelligent and comprehensive park administration."

Sylvester Baxter died on January 28, 1927. He had lived for many years on Murray Hill Road in Malden, Massachusetts.

The Coalition is very pleased to be able to reprint the views and descriptions of Franklin Park from Mr. Baxter's discerning eye.

-- Richard Heath
August, 1979

FRANKLIN PARK

Franklin Park is the great rural park of the Boston municipal system. Its area is 520 acres, but from its compact shape, as well as by reason of its command of extensive prospects of permanently sylvar and pastoral scenery, it has the effect of being much larger than it actually is. It was originally called the West Roxbury Park, by reason of its location. In 1885 the name of Franklin Park was adopted in honor of one of the most eminent sons of Boston.

In its landscape character Franklin Park is typical of New England pastoral scenery with areas of rocky woodland, and was selected for its capabilities as the most extensive piece of ground with a pleasingly simple rural aspect in the near neighborhood of urban population. The main purpose actuating its design was to adapt it in the fullest possible measure to the obtaining, on the part of the multitude, of the restful, health-restoring recreation obtained from the enjoyment of beautiful rural scenery. In his "notes on the Plan of Franklin Park", included in the report of the Park Commission for 1885, Mr. Olmsted remarked:

Scenery is more than an object or a series of objects; more than an object or a series of objects; more than a spectacle, more than a scene or a series of scenes, more than a landscape, and other than a series of landscapes.

Moreover, there may be beautiful scenery in which not a beautiful blossom or leaf or rock, bush or tree, not a gleam of water or of turf shall be beautiful. But there is no beautiful scenery that does not give the mind an emotional impulse different from that resulting from whatever beauty may be found in a room, courtyard, or garden, within which vision is obviously confined by walls or other surrounding artificial constructions.

To counteract a certain oppression of town life, manifest in excessive nervous tension, over-anxiety, hasty disposition . . . the purpose has been to give the scenery of Franklin Park the soothing charm which lies in the qualities of breadth, distance, perspective and mystery.

Beside the main purpose of a great park, in meeting the need for the enjoyment of rural scenery, there are various subordinate uses for which there is certain to be a strong popular demand and which if properly provided for in laying out the plan will guard against the intrusion of incongruous elements in places where they may work unspeakable harm. To this end, something like one-third of the ground has been designed to answer purposes relatively to the main park analogous to those of a

fore-court, portico and reception room, with minor apartments opening from them for special uses, and to which it is desirable that access should be had at all times without entering the main park, forming what Mr. Olmsted terms the "ante-park".

There are about six miles of drives not including the boundary roads, two miles of bridle path and thirteen miles of walks.

The Country Park

The Country Park, which is about a mile long and three-fourths of a mile wide, is divided from the "ante-park" section by the transverse traffic street, called Glen Road. It is so separated from the other sections by gates and walls as to be closed at night, while the other parts may be lighted and used. The intrusion of all purely decorative objects is carefully guarded against in the plan, and a wholly natural aspect, so far as is attainable with popular use, is aimed at, the roads and paths being simply regarded as means of convenient access to the various parts of interest without injury to the landscape and in a way to disperse the visiting crowds widely in all parts. In most parts the turf is kept short by sheep rather than law mowers; showy vegetation and tawdry adornment are eschewed.

The plan looks to its being maintained in quietness; quietness both to the eye and the ear. A grateful serenity may be enjoyed in it by many thousand people at a time if they are not drawn into throngs by spectacular attractions, but allowed to distribute themselves as they are otherwise likely to do. The design aims to provide that from no part of the Country park division shall anything of an artificial character in other divisions intrude itself upon the vision.

A large portion of the Country park is wooded and adapted to the use of picnic and basket parties, especially small family parties. Various conveniences for these have been created and others are to be prepared as occasion demands. Tennis courts, croquet grounds, archery ranges, and small lawns for children's festivities are planned in connection with suitable picnic grounds at localities like the Wilderness, Juniper Hill, Waittwood, Heathfield, Rock Milton, Rock Morton, Abbotswood and on the western slopes of Scarboro Hill.

On Schoolmaster's Hill a long terrace has been covered by arbors with vines on trellises and furnished with tables and seats, with compartments intended specially for family basket parties. The outlook here is on the -roadest and quietest purely pastoral scene that the park can offer. Adjoining the arbors is a house for shelter, with a parcel room and closets, and opportunity for obtaining without charge hot water for making tea. This picturesque building was designed by the late Arthur Rotch. Schoolmaster's Hill was named from the circumstance explained by a commemorative tablet of bronze on a rock near the east end of the line of arbors. The inscription reads:

Near this rock, A.D. 1823-1825, was the home of Schoolmaster Ralph Waldo Emerson. Here some of his earlier poems were written; among them that from which the following lines are taken:

Oh, when I am safe in my sylvan home,
I tread on the pride of Greece and Rome,
And when I am stretched beneath the pines
Where the evening star so holy shines,

I laugh at the lore and the pride of man,
At the sophist schools and the learned clan,--
For what are they all, in their high conceit,
When man in the bush with God may meet?

Ellicottdale is a meadow of about eight acres, central to nearly all the picnic and basket party grounds. It has an irregular and shady margin. This space is specially reserved for lawn games in which young women and girls participate, like croquet and lawn tennis. A walk from William Street, passing under the Circuit drive by Ellicott arch, gives convenient access to this meadow, and on the north side of the arch is a house of stone, designed by Edmund M. Wheelwright as city architect, and called Ellicott House. Here assignment of ground for play may be obtained needed implements hired, and outer garments left in lockers.

South of Ellicottdale a walk and a branch of the main drive wind gradually to the summit of Scarboro hill, with an extensive prospect, immediately overlooking the great central meadow of the park, cropped by a large flock of sheep. The Dairy, planned for the slope of this hill, has not yet been established. This Dairy is designed to meet the necessities of picnic parties in this part of the park and to supply to all a few simple refreshments such as are recommended for children and invalids; more especially fresh dairy products of the best quality. "Cows are to be kept in an apartment separated from the main room by a glass partition, as in the famous exquisite dairies of Holland and Belgium; and those who desire it are to be furnished with milk warm from the cow, as in St. James park, London. Fowls are also to be kept and new-laid eggs supplied." This district slopes toward the prevailing summer breeze; is sheltered on the north; is already agreeably wooded, and will be a place at which invalids and mothers with little children may be advised to pass the best part of the day.

Scarboro pond lies at the foot of Scarboro hill, to the southward. It is an irregular, river-like piece of water, with provisions for boating in summer and skating in winter, when the level is reduced four feet for safety and to admit passing beneath the bridges. A striking feature of the scenery here is the precipitous face of Rock Morton rising abruptly from the water. Only about half the pond as planned has yet been made. It receives the surface drainage of the park from a brook that winds through the central meadow, and is reinforced in dry seasons by water from Jamaica pond. A beautiful house for boating and skating, designed by

Edmund M. Wheelwright as city architect, has not yet been erected. The Park Boat Service (see Marine park) has canoes and rowboats on the pond, with excellent arrangements for their use.

The Playstead

The Playstead is the northernmost section of the park. Its main feature is the magnificent playground of thirty acres, a nearly level field of turf with groups of trees here and there. It is designed for the athletic recreation of the city's schoolboys, for occasional civic ceremonies and exhibitions, and other purposes likely to attract crowds of spectators; a terrace 800 feet long, with an irregular front built of boulders cleared from the Playstead, and overgrown with vegetation that harmonizes it with the natural scenery. Looking towards the Overlook from the opposite side of the Playstead this growth of vegetation so unites the terrace with the bank of trees behind that its existence is hardly perceptible except for the large roof of the shelter building, quiet and gray in tone like a huge rock, and with gentle convex curves. The building was designed by C. Howard Walker. This shelter building serves as a retreat in inclement weather and has a stand for simple refreshments served in excellent style by J. A. Hendric & Brother, whose large catering establishment is near the easterly side of the park. An arch in the Overlook wall gives direct access to the basement from the Playstead field, so that players may conveniently gain access to the lockers, lavatories, etc. Here in the basement there is also a station for park-keepers with a lock-up, a women's retiring-room, and a coat-room. Between the arch and the basement there is a charming little sunken garden where rhododendrons and other plants flourish luxuriantly. The Overlook is shaded during the afternoon by the woods behind, and spectators of games and other proceedings on the meadow look away from the sun.

The Greeting, and Other Divisions

The Greeting, with its adjacent divisions, the Music Court and the Little Folks' Fair, has not yet been constructed. The Greeting is to be a formal promenade or meeting-ground, half a mile in length, composed of a series of parallel and contiguous drives, rides and walks, with a special way for bicycles. The plan provides for minumental, architectural and various decorative adjuncts here, although they are not considered essential. Suitable positions are provided for statues, water-jets, floral baskets, bird-cages, etc. If statues are desired in the park for any occasion they will be assigned appropriate locations here, and nowhere else. Electric lights are contemplated both for the Playstead and the Greeting, and as they are designed to be free from underwood they will be adapted for use by night, as well as by day, like the Parkway. Together they will form an unenclosed ground nearly a mile long across the park.

The Music Court, adjoining the Greeting, will be a sylvan amphitheatre for concerts.

The Little Folks' Fair will, as its name implies, be a popular feature for the entertainment of children, so enclosed as to prevent straying and combine freedom with safety. The plan thoughtfully provides for a great variety of games and amusing exercises and exhibitions, including swings, scups, see-saws, sand courts, flying horses, toy booths, marionettes, goat carriages, donkey courses, bear pits, etc.

The Deer Park, on the other side of the Greeting, will supply a range for a small herd of deer.

Sargent's Field, adjoining the Deer Park, will provide a playground for tennis, etc., on the easterly side of the park.

Long Crouch Woods, adjoining the Playstead on the east, is reserved for use as a zoological garden. This division bears the name by which the old Colonial road, now called Seaver street, was originally distinguished.

The Steading is a rocky, sterile knoll, screened by woods, reserved as a site for the permanent offices of the park. The name refers to the offices of a rural estate.

Refectory Hill

Refectory Hill is the site of the great restaurant for the park. The large building, designed by Hartwell & Richardson, will be opened for use in 1896. It is a structure of light-colored brick and terra cotta, 121 feet long by 69 feet wide, with a large restaurant and a private dining room on the ground floor, and staircases leading to a roof-garden with pavilions on each corner, connected by covered galleries on three sides, the remaining space open to the sky. The pergola, built upon a terrace similar in construction to the Playstead Overlook, is on a level with the main floor, paved with brick and with a trellised roof supported by open groups of wooden columns. This terrace commands extensive sylvan prospects. While all the other park buildings are simple and picturesque in character, the Refectory is marked by an elegance of style in keeping with its site and purpose. In connection with the Refectory is a carriage court and a circular range of horse-sheds for the convenience of visitors. Being close to one of the principal entrances, its location is remarkably convenient for its purpose. For visitors by street-cars, as the objective point of a drive out over the Parkway, a dinner or supper at the Refectory will form an attractive motive for excursions to Franklin Park on pleasant days through the open season, and for sleighing parties it should also be a popular rendezvous. Meanwhile their want is met in large measure at the handsome establishment of J. A. Hendrie & Brother on Talbot Avenue, overlooking Franklin Field, near Blue Hill Avenue, a short distance to the southward--a large restaurant building with private dining rooms and one of the most beautiful ball rooms in Boston.

The landscape design of Franklin Park is notable for the pure simplicity of artistic feeling with which existing features have been developed in a way that restores the ground to nature and gives the scenery an ideal character. The result fully realizes the intention expressed in Mr. Olmsted's notes. The formal introductions are placed in landscape obscurity, and in the leading features of the ground no change in its original aspect has been made except to give "a fuller development, aggrandizement, and emphasis to what are regarded as the more interesting and effective existing elements of their scenery, and of taking out or subordinating elements that neutralize or conflict with those chosen to be made more of." To sequestrate so far as possible the scenery of the park, bordering plantations of woods will, when sufficiently grown, exclude the conflicting elements of the outer landscape formed by the gradual growth of the city in the neighborhood. On the other hand, by the developing of vistas and the shaping and framing of prospects by suitable foregrounds and modulated contours, permanent features of the outer landscape are effectively utilized in the park scenery.

Foremost in this respect is the way in which the Blue Hills of Milton, themselves now a great public pleasure-ground, have been made practically a part of Franklin Park by incorporating them into the scenery with the greatest effect from many points of view, their noble, mountain-like undulations presenting the statliest of backgrounds. For example may be cited the first glimpse of the range presented at the entrance to the Playstead from Walnut Avenue, at the north, the blue summits just lifting themselves above the rise of the green meadow in the foreground, completing an enchantingly pastoral picture. Then, the full view of the easterly portion of the range from the southerly end of the Playstead Overlook at the end of the long valley whose hither slope is formed by the great central meadow of the Country Park; the hills five miles away and the first mile within the park. Another view, already famous is that from the Hagborne Hill Outlook in the Wilderness; entirely sylvan in character, the eye perceiving hardly anything except woodland until it strikes distant villages at the foot of the range. Other important views of the range are obtained from Scarboro Hill and various points on the Circuit Drive.

Of two broad fields of extended vision in the park one is that from the Playstead Overlook, above mentioned, and the other is the outlook westwardly from the Refectory terrace, where the view extends permanently to the treetops of Forest Hills cemetery and to those of the Aboretum; both backgrounds ever to remain clothed with trees. The axes of these two main views cross nearly at right angles about midway between the two hanging woods of Schoolmaster Hill and Abbottswood crags. This locality is at the centre of the park and is considered the pivot of the design. Looking in the general direction of either axis, Mr. Olmsted points out how a moderately broad, open view is to be had between simple bodies of forest, the foliage masses higher than the central lines.

From wherever these larger prospects open the middle distances will be quiet, slightly hollowed surfaces of turf or buskets, bracken, sweet-fern, or mosses, the backgrounds formed by wood-sides of a soft, even, subdued tone, with long, graceful, undulating sky lines, which, according to the point of view of the observer on the park, will be from one to five miles away.

A contrast to the open part of the park is the romantically picturesque, rugged and rocky section, best visited by following the Circuit road, or neighboring walks, between Scarboro Hill and Rock Morton, Rock Milton, Waittwood, and Juniper Hill, through a part of the Wilderness, and between Hagborne and Schoolmaster Hill. This character of scenery is intensified in the upper part of the Wilderness, which is penetrated by a loop from the Circuit Drive, passing by winding courses among the rocks. A similar episodal purpose is served by the branch drive to Scarboro Hill.

A striking feature of the scenery through July is the enchanting floral spectacle offered by the blossoms of the Rosa Wichuriana, a Japanese wild rose first introduced at the Arnold Arboretum. Franklin Park is the first place where it became established. It was tried experimentally in the planting and rapidly became a prominent element in the landscape when in bloom. It has a creeping habit, covering the the way-side borders and clambering over the rocks in splendid masses of snowy bloom.

The names of localities in the park were carefully chosen by Mr. Olmsted with reference to local circumstances, historical or topographically descriptive, and were applied when the plan was made. They are mostly of plain English origin, and are often coupled with appropriate terminals. Examples of old homestead names are Scarboro Hill, Hagborne Hill, Waittwood, Rock Morton and Ellicottdale. Nazingdale is from the birthplace of the first settlers. The ancient Indian footpath used in the earlier communications between Boston and Plymouth passed through the park, and Old Trail road, being nearly on its line, commemorates it. Resting Place is a name that appropriately marks a shady knoll upon which the first military company formed in the Colonies for armed resistance to British authority rested on its march home from the fight at Lexington and Concord. The captain and lieutenant of this company belonged to families that once had homes on the park lands, and from them the names of Heathfield and Pierpont Road are taken. The region called the Wilderness was referred to in records of the early part of the eighteenth century as "the Rocky Wilderness Land." Schoolmaster Hill is named from the circumstance that William Emerson and his brother, Ralph Waldo, while keeping school in Roxbury, lived in a house on the east side of this hill. In private letters which have been preserved Emerson referred fondly to the wilderness and rurality of the neighborhood.

In the various roads and walks the main purpose is to provide for a constant mild enjoyment of simply pleasing rural scenery while in easy

movement, and by curves and grades avoiding unnecessary violence to nature. Every turn is suggested by natural circumstances. The Circuit Drive has at no point a grade steeper than one foot in twenty-five, or four per cent, and in the branch drives the steepest grades are one in sixteen, or less than six per cent. These grades have been easily obtained and the roads as a rule coincide with the natural surface, and slightly below it as a rule, so as to be less conspicuous from a distance.

While the saddle-paths are designed, are two miles in extent, including the double riding course in the Greeting, as yet unconstructed, together with those in the Parkway there is a continuous saddle-path six miles long and from twenty-four to thirty feet wide, ultimately to be well shaded.

There are ten entrances for both drives and footways, with eight special foot entrances in addition. There are beside, five carriage entrances and two special foot entrances to the Country Park at convenient points. The main entrance may be called that by the Parkway near Forest Hills, which is carried over Forest Hills Street by a handsome bridge of monumental character, with steps communicating with the street below. This gives convenient communication for a line of streetcars soon to be established here, while pleasure traffic is carried out of the way of funeral processions and general traffic.

The most popular entrance at present is that on Blue Hill Avenue, near Refectory Hill and the beginning of the proposed Greeting. Most of the visitors coming by streetcars come to this entrance, which is the starting-point for the park carriage service, admirably conducted by Messrs. Bacon & Tarbell. A handsome shelter of stone, with tiled roof, is provided here for passengers waiting to take the carriages. These are handsome vehicles with seats for eleven passengers, in which the drive through the park may be taken as comfortably as in a private carriage. The carriages start at frequent intervals. The fare for the round trip is twenty-five cents, and checks permitting passengers to stop over at the principal points, continuing the trip by subsequent carriages, are given. Persons wishing, for example, to enjoy a basket lunch at Schoolmaster Hill may take a stopover check, dismount at the nearest stopping place to that point, and proceed by another carriage when desired either from the place of dismounting or from some other stopping place mentioned on the check, to which a pleasant walk may be taken. In this way also the views from the Playstead Overlook, Hagborne Hill Outlook and Scarboro Hill may be enjoyed at leisure, a boat may be taken at Scarboro Pond, or a game of tennis or croquet may be played at Ellicottdale. The drive covers the entire circuit of the park, including the loop and branch roads. Park carriages may also be specially engaged for a trip over the Parkway and through the Arnold Arboretum.

The Playstead entrance from Walnut Avenue has a special interest by reason of its fine view of the Blue Hills, previously described. This entrance is opposite School Street and is reached from the Eggleston Square cars by a walk of two or three minutes. This is the nearest carriage

entrance to the park from Columbus Avenue, which has been extended to Walnut Avenue opposite Seaver Street. A foot entrance to the park is at the corner of Seaver street and Walnut Avenue. Columbus Avenue, as soon as its extension is constructed and the streetcars run over it, will form one of the most convenient and direct approaches to the park.

Other carriage entrances are by Old Trail Road from Seaver Street on the east, opposite Humboldt Avenue; from Canterbury Street on the south to Circuit Road; from Morton Street on the west, to Circuit Road near Rock Milton; and from Sigourney Street on the north by Glen Road, which, with Glen Lane, forms a traffic road across the park, sunken for a part of the way so as not to mar the grand prospect southward from the Playstead Overlook.

For guidance in walks through the park the plan given in this book* may best be consulted. Large copies of the plan are prominently displayed in the various shelter and other buildings.

(END OF EXCERPT)

*Baxter refers to the 1891 revised plan of Franklin Park. Copies are available from the Franklin Park Coalition for \$1.50.

